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ABSTRACT

A study was made of 10 practicum students in the College of Education at Louisiana Tech University and 7 cooperating teachers at a nearby middle school. The purpose of the study was to describe and analyze the practicum experience and its role in the preparation of middle school practicum students. Analysis of the study data yielded several findings. First, from the students' perspective, content knowledge and classroom management skills were not adequate, and they wanted more practical applications in addition to the opportunity to teach more. Second, from the teachers' perspective, students' content knowledge and classroom management skills were inadequate, and the university should provide some structured and formal methods to assist students in their deficiencies. Third, students were concerned that they were not receiving enough teaching experience, and students appeared to feel that they were in hostile environments, instead of pleasant school settings. Finally, teachers were concerned with the large number of students that were assigned to some teachers, while others received no assignments. (ND)

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**Concerns and Perceptions of a Middle School Practicum Program:
A Case Study**

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**Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association**

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Concerns and Perceptions of a Middle School Practicum Program: A Case Study

During the last several years, the role of the teacher has become more complex as society has made greater demands on schools. As schools become more complex and demands from the public become greater, the role of the teacher becomes even more complicated. This need has prompted teacher preparation programs to upgrade and revise their teaching requirements in order to meet the needs of today's educators. Some student teachers are very often turned-off with teaching after their intern mainly due to bad practicum experiences. Entering the student teaching experience unprepared, can result in many frustrations, as well as leading to the decision to change careers.

Hawkey (1996) during his student teaching experience stated, "My lack of content knowledge, lack of experience in front of a class, shaky self-confidence, and emotional reactions to real or imagined threats, have all combined to create a huge formless monster," (pp. 352-359).

Fennell (1993) conducted a case study to determine if preservice teachers felt prepared enough for the classroom upon starting a 16-week practicum. The survey, which was developed from the course objectives, raised questions concerning the teachers' preparation for the internship.

Fennel (1993) found that, overall, the intern students had very successful and rewarding experiences during the process. Of the four areas: lesson planning, questioning and responding, classroom management, and instructional strategies; classroom management was the one area in which

students felt that they were not adequately prepared. Even though the students had participated in discussions involving case studies, they did not feel that they were prepared enough to handle, initially, the classroom management skills. As a result of this study, the development of a model that would allow for more integration of knowledge areas with classroom content was recommended.

Bell (1995) conducted a two-part study over a period of 5 months which reported the experiences of student teachers and supervising teachers in what was called Professional Development Sites (PDS). A PDS is a public school that is used for the purpose of training teachers. The supervising teachers in the PDS had complete independence in determining what types of experiences the student teachers would receive. The role of the university teacher was to serve as a liaison and resource person for the preservice teachers as well as the public school teachers. Three schools, very different according to their setting, leadership style, and level of commitment, participated in the study. The focus of the PDS experience was preservice teacher training which included management techniques, teaching strategies, lesson planning, and media.

Bell (1995) found that not only were ideas developed on how to work better with supervising teachers, but her research further supported the efforts of schools and colleges of education to provide valuable, practical experiences for preservice teachers. The experience of having several teachers supervise student teachers provided opportunities, according to Bell (1995) to become stronger teachers.

A study conducted by Maxie (1989) grew out of an acknowledgment of the importance of teacher preparation programs, and critics referring to student teaching as controversial. The study, which was conducted over a

twenty-two week period, involved eight student teachers, eleven cooperating teachers and a college supervisor. The study sought to determine the concerns and change in concerns of student teachers. Maxie (1989) found that self-adequacy concerns, which were related to content knowledge and instructional skills, were initial concerns of student teachers, the survival concerns included classroom management, discipline, and motivation. He further stated that student teachers assume that student teaching involves being able to put into practice what has been learned in the teacher preparation program, however, because of these survival concerns, student teachers soon realized that they were not prepared.

Sudzina (1992) also conducted a study which points out the need for reforming and upgrading teacher education programs. By integrating a case study textbook with a theory textbook, students were challenged to apply theories to solving problems. The textbooks were used in a sophomore-level educational psychology course. Results of Sudzina's study indicated that the use of case studies in teacher preparation programs can actually strengthen the connection between theory and practical classroom applications. Preservice teachers were not only able to increase their understanding of the course, but also helped them to be able to communicate their own concerns about teaching.

Method

The survey population for this study consisted of ten practicum students and seven cooperating teachers in the College of Education at Louisiana Tech University.

The site for this study was a middle school (grades 7-8) located near the university. The school serves approximately a total of 850 students of

mixed racial and economic backgrounds. The school facility is modern, with brightly colored classrooms. The typical classroom has a total of 30 desks in each with the traditional row patterns, usually facing the front, and a teacher's desk. The classrooms are equipped with their own individual climate control, television, and numerous visual aids.

The data gathering process involved approximately 10 hours of observation of teachers and practicum students, and an additional 7 hours of interviews with the cooperating teachers. Because cooperating teachers are not required to allow students to teach, there were some occasions when, because a practicum student was not teaching, the cooperating teacher was observed. Appointments, which were made in order to interview the teachers, usually took place during their planning period. Because the researcher was not only interested in some specific concerns, but also understanding how the subjects felt, an open-ended interview procedure was used. A survey, completed by the practice students, was given for the purpose of understanding their thoughts and concerns as related to their practicum experience. The use of interviews, observations, surveys, and student journals provided the necessary triangulation to support the theory.

Analysis

The analysis of the data revealed the following:

1. From the students' perspectives content knowledge and classroom management skills are not adequate. Students would like more practical applications in addition to the opportunity to teach more.

2. From the teachers' perspectives, students' content knowledge and classroom management skills are inadequate. The university should provide some structured and formal methods to assist students in their deficiencies.

3. Students are concerned that they are not receiving enough teaching experience. In addition, students appear to feel that they are in hostile environments, instead of pleasant and conducive school settings.

4. Teachers are concerned with the large number of students that are being assigned to some teachers, while other teachers receive no assignments. In addition, teachers appear to want some input in the assignment of practicum students.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the practicum experience and its role in the preparation of middle-school practicum students. The researcher focused on the concerns and perceptions of the participants involved in the middle school practicum program in order to determine the effectiveness and relevance of the program.

Overall, the practicum students, despite some obstacles, are receiving some valuable experiences. Simply being exposed to the classroom setting is beneficial in itself. Educators involved in the teacher preparation programs are realizing more seriously than ever, that in an attempt to prepare students to teach on different levels, such as the middle school, students must have firsthand knowledge of the adolescent age group they will be teaching. The middle school practicum program is, indeed, providing this experience for these students.

Students are also benefiting by being exposed to different teaching styles and techniques. By rotating students with different teachers, students are able to compare the different teaching methods and, as a result, determine which ones are more effective than others. Student surveys reflected such an opinion with several of them saying "I like the rotation because you get to see more teachers and experience their teaching styles."

Although there appears to be some valuable learning experiences resulting from the program, there are also some concerns by both teachers, as well as students, that need to be addressed. Are the students prepared enough to organize and present a lesson? How effective are students able to handle classroom management situations? Do practicum students need more exposure to practical application situations as opposed to theory? Should teachers have input in the assignment of practicum students? Are students not being allowed to teach because of their perceived inadequacies?

It appears that concerns of student preparation are shared by both the students and teachers. Student surveys indicate that, while most students were experiencing some problems in their knowledge content or classroom management skills, most students were not having problems in both areas. This could have some implication for individual deficiencies and/or weaknesses, as well as program preparation. Teacher preparation programs, however, should be aware of the existence of these concerns. Because of the major role that field experiences play in teacher education, it is very important that students receive appropriate training and role modeling. Teacher education programs must be prepared in such a way that they accommodate the needs of the students in order for success to occur and for students to benefit from effective teaching methods. Teacher preparation programs cannot simply continue to function in traditional ways with the

same old values, beliefs, and norms. Review of related literature has shown how some teacher education programs have incorporated methods such as case studies in an effort to prepare teachers to make the transition from student teaching to full-time permanent employment. In an effort to prepare the students for this transition, the university might consider looking at some methods of identifying the areas which appear to be of concern, and make the necessary adjustments to assure success of the program as well as the students.

Teachers, as participants in the program, appear to want to be in the decision making process. Research has shown that participation in organization decision making by individuals who will be affected by the decision, and in addition, knowledgeable about the area in which the decision is to be made, has several advantages. When participants are involved in the decision-making process, feelings of satisfaction are enhanced, creativity is encouraged, and the participants acceptance and commitment to the decision are strengthened. Teachers, having some input in the decision to accept or not accept a practicum student, may have made a very big difference in the way that both students and teachers perceived the program and its effectiveness. Although most teachers appeared to have wanted some involvement in decision-making, for one teacher it did not make a difference.

The use of a variety of middle schools could provide some insight as to whether the experiences were actually the results of uncooperative teachers, unprepared students, or a combination of both. With a larger pool of cooperating teachers to select from, students may have a better opportunity to experience a more auspicious setting.

Since the study was carried out in a short period of time with a small amount of participants, findings should not be generalized to other settings. Recommendations for the use of a larger population in a different, or several settings, would be advised.

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